

Unshackled

Stories of Transformed Lives

Adapted from "Unshackled" Radio Broadcasts

from the Pacific Garden Mission, Chicago, Illinois

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Chapter Six

Say It in Swedish

CARL GRADEN slammed his empty beer glass on the kitchen table and swore. Just because he'd buried his dad the day before didn't mean he was in any mood to talk to a preacher. But there, coming up the front walk of Carl's Rockford, Illinois, house, was his pastor.

The doorbell rang. Carl shuffled toward it. He knew what the preacher would say - and he didn't want to hear it.

It was more "stuffed-shirt" than Carl expected. "My boy, I trust you'll profit by your father's drinking."

Carl slouched on the sofa. "Profit by it?" he repeated. "Exactly. You've seen what your father's drinking did to him - to your mother. Don't let it happen to you. Drink can ruin a man's life. I remember a true story I heard about a man in Chicago who-

Carl couldn't stand any more of that twaddle. What did this parson know about life anyway? He cocked his head. "Have you ever had a drink, Reverend?"

The other man flushed. He murmured something about thanking GOD he'd been saved from such temptation. However, Carl hadn't squelched him.

"And this man in Chicago. He wandered into a Skid Row mission there. The Pacific Garden Mission, it was-" "Funny name for a mission - Pacific Garden-" Carl tried to interrupt.

But the story went on. Some derelict had wandered into the mission, left his name and a sealed envelope with the man at the door. "If I don't show up here again and anybody ever asks about me, open it," he had said. The mission folks never saw him again, and when they opened the envelope weeks later, the note inside said he was then on his way to jump in Lake Michigan.

"All because of the demon rum," the pastor finished.

"Well, well, you don't say," Carl said flatly. He stood up. His pastor stood up, too, put his hand on Carl's arm. Carl edged away, toward the front door. He couldn't get the man out of the house fast enough - to open up another bottle.

Nursing his drink in the kitchen later, Carl snorted to himself, "'Profit by your Dad's drinking,'" The parson didn't know half the story. He'd profited by Dad's love of the bottle all right.

Eight years old he'd been when he had his first drink.

It was a Christmas Eve; his Dad had given him a small bottle of Swedish liquor.

"Come on, Carl, my boy, have another little drink with your father," the Senior Graden had roared.

Mom sniffled. "Don't you give that child another drink."

The stuff burned the throat of the boy the first two times: he didn't like it. "The big ones don't burn any more than the little ones," his dad insisted, so Carl choked down another drink.

"You'll wreck his life." Mom started to cry. "He's just a baby."

"Getting him started being a man early, that's all," Dad tossed off the explanation to Mom. "He's going to be able to hold his liquor like a man and get confirmed at church in Swedish. He'll be all right then, no matter what happens to him."

Carl's throat stopped burning. A cozy "bonfire" glowed. inside him; he liked it. "Hey, Dad," he said. "It's pretty good stuff. Pretty good stuff."

"Learn to hold your liquor like a man, get confirmed at church in Swedish, and you'll be all right," Next thing, Dad shouted at Mom, "Come on, have a little fun with your husband. It's Christmas, woman, don't you know what that means?"

Profit from Dad's drunks? Sure.

Every time Dad got drunk, he had blasted at Carl about learning Swedish, about getting confirmed. There was nothing to do but obey, to spoil his summer vacations with grammar study and vocabulary. It was dull stuff, but he enlivened the days by sneaking liquor from Dad. Secretly he gloated over the burning, the glow, the kicks.

"You get confirmed in Swedish and you'll be all right, my boy," Dad reminded him over and over.

Then Dad got sick from so much drinking. "You'll never make confirmation in Swedish. Do it in English before I die."

"GOD is omnipotent, omnipresent and omniscient," Carl recited in church one Sunday when he was fifteen.

"s fine, my boy," Dad praised him. "You're all fixed up now; you're all right,"

Carl forgot confirmation in a hurry. GOD to him was somebody who liked Swedish better than English. Carl Graden was all right - especially when he had a bottle handy.

Dad hung onto life and his bottle for nine more years.

Doctor called it "acute alcoholic poisoning" at the end, but Carl shrugged. He wasn't going to be scared onto the "water wagon." As for the pastor's warning . . . Carl hit the bottle harder than ever.

"It's all because of Mom," he explained himself to the fellows down at Sam's Place. "She looks so-sad-when she knows I've been hanging one on. I've just got to come down here and forget about that look on her face."

One Saturday night, three years after Dad died, Carl fell in at the front door, blind drunk. He focused his eyes on Mom standing in front of the fireplace, sobbing.

He grabbed the nearest chair, smoothed back his rumpled blond hair, and tried to ask distinctly what the matter was. Then he fell across a chair.

Mom's sobs became wilder. Over and over she screamed at him. "You're drunk again. I can't stand it any more. For twenty-five years, your father - and now you. You're drunk, you're drunk. GOD, come and take me. Oh, GOD! GOD, GOD!"

The old lady's hysterical, she'll calm down tomorrow, Carl thought, then he "passed out" in the big chair.

But Mom was worse the next day. The day after that, they called it a nervous breakdown. In six months she was dead.

"It was all the drinking around here that killed her," Carl muttered to himself over a solitary beer the day of the funeral.

And he kept on drinking. Soon he lost his job. He found another and lost that. "You'd think they'd give a fellow a break," Carl told his pals at Sam's. "What's a hangover once in a while?"

He didn't have both feet in the gutter yet. "And I won't have, either," he vowed. "I'm still a man. I still go to church, still put money in the collection plate. I'm going to leave town. I'll get out of Rockford. Maybe new friends, new surroundings, maybe a real break with a good job. I'll go to Chicago. I'll pull myself up - I've got to."

So in 1928 Carl landed in Chicago broke, begging for a new start, and thirsty.

He tried a good job, then another. He lost them both.

Then he tried a lot of bad jobs. He lost them too.

There was a hospital on the South Side that guaranteed a "cure." It failed the week after they let him out. He tried another cure. It failed too.

He lay in gutters, he wrapped himself in newspapers and slept on park benches, he was "rolled" in back alleys. On the coldest nights, he stood in front of hotel hot-air vents to keep from freezing.

At the end of fifteen years, he knew he was a Skid Row bum, just crawling from one bottle to the next, but he didn't care any more. He was forty-three years old, sick, scared, and alone, except for a bottle.

Christmas Eve, 1943, Carl stumbled along a Chicago street. His shoes didn't fit or even match. His blond hair was matted.

Was that a Christmas carol? On South State Street? He looked up, saw a loudspeaker and spat. "'Let Heaven and nature sing' -let 'em sing their heads off. I haven't got anything to sing about. Shut up with that stuff." Then he fell down.

When he got his balance again and started to weave on down the street, a tall young fellow, clean and in a pressed suit, touched his arm. "Can I do anything for you?" he asked.

What's the deal, Carl wondered. He'd seen the fellow come out of that building with the loudspeaker. "Leave me alone," Carl told him. Then he swore. "Yes, there is something you can do. Can that lousy music."

The young fellow shook his head. "I'm afraid I can't do that. It's Christmas. A lot of folks like to hear those carols. They're coming over the mission loudspeaker."

Carl meant to tell the fellow to shut up. He meant to move on. But he didn't.

"Mission?" he asked.

"The Pacific Garden Mission," the young fellow explained. "Say, why don't you come into the meeting?"

Pacific Garden Mission - he'd heard that name before.

There'd been a drunk - a drunk in Chicago. He'd jumped in Lake Michigan and left a note for his pals - at the Pacific Garden Mission.

Hey, wait a minute, Carl thought; I'm not that far down yet. I don't want to jump in Lake Michigan.

"Pacific Garden Mission. That's a laugh," he told the young fellow beside him. And he shuffled off. He turned around when only halfway up the block and shouted, "I'll see you again, but not

till I want to leave my name with the nice people at the Pacific Garden Mission."

He wanted a drink after that, so he staggered down State Street to bum one from somebody. He had luck, and he bummed two, then another. Then everything went black.

Next thing he knew, he was sprawled in a dirty, littered snow bank. Someone was tugging at him, telling him to get up, wake up, get moving. He writhed into consciousness. All he wanted to do was to sleep, to forget, to die. To die? In Lake Michigan. That was it. "Oh, GOD!" he screamed. "Please GOD. If there is a GOD in Heaven - come down here and help me."

That afternoon, when Carl hitched in the Pacific Garden Mission door, the same young fellow he had shouted at before caught his arm, asked him to sit down in the chapel, and said the service would not start for an hour.

Carl sat down. "Look," he said. "I'm not kidding anybody any more. I'm here for one of two things. Either I get some help or I leave my name for future reference after they've pulled me out of the lake.

"Don't bother to tell me to trust in GOD, either. I heard about that in the catechism. I don't trust anything but a bottle. A full bottle. And I hate that. I'm on the level. Whatever you've got to offer, in the name of GOD, give it to me!"

When the young fellow answered, it sounded like the catechism all over again, but he made it come alive.

He told Carl that GOD was omnipresent. He was a Friend, right on the spot when Carl needed Him.

He said He was omniscient, too. That meant He knew Carl inside and out, better than Carl knew himself.

And he told Carl He was omnipotent, too, that He had power to free Carl from the drink habit which was killing him. Carl was to truly turn to GOD and receive Him as his Saviour.

The man even quoted a Scripture verse. **"But as many as received him to them gave he power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name,"** then added, "Until GOD has your will - even His omnipotence (power) cannot work."

Carl had to grab something, and this was solid. Could GOD do anything with a drunk like him? He didn't know, but he'd let GOD have a try. Right there, he said Yes - to GOD and JESUS CHRIST. He heard more from the Bible, GOD's Word.

Carl Graden turned over the reins of his life, such as it was, to GOD. At last, he knew he was right.

He moved to Washington for a new start. He found a job, and he held it. Then he got married. He hasn't had a drink in nine years.

Can GOD do anything with a drunk like Carl Graden?

Carl knows the answer is Yes.

He says Ruth, the girl he married, proved it to him.

"Carl," she told him one day, "I've spent my life trying to imitate CHRIST, trying to develop the natural good I thought was in me. All of a sudden I know that theory is no use. Carl, if JESUS CHRIST, the Person, can change a man the way you've changed, I want Him in my life, too."

~ end of chapter 6 ~
